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RS 110 B

### THE JESUS OF MARK

Last summer I went to a Christian concert in Anaheim, California. At one point in the program one of the musicians made a comment along the following lines:

It amazes me, these movies that Hollywood puts out about Jesus. Movies like 'King of Kings,' 'Godspel,' 'Jesus Christ Superstar,' and 'The Greatest Story Ever Told.' You've got men who don't know anything about Jesus, at least that is the impression I get from watching these things, that are trying to tell us what Jesus was like !

The man had a good point. How can someone teach something that he knows nothing about? I heard an interviewer ask a person, "Do you believe in the God of the Bible?" The person answered, "No." When asked why the person said, "Well, there's too many contradictions in the Bible for it to be true." The interviewer then asked the person, "Have you ever read the Bible for yourself?" And he said, "No." Well, if one desires a little realiable information about Jesus it is best to get it first-hand --- from the Bible.

Now right away I realize that problems will develop. The Protestants want to say that the Bible is "freestanding," a tool that can be used to judge society, various individual cultures, and even the Church. While the Catholics equally want it to be known that the Bible can be understood only in reference to the Church, that the Bible is dependent upon the traditions of the Church for correct interpretation. Unfortunately, I cannot take time to hammer out this controversy, because this paper is not being written about the interpretation of scripture. Rather, I want to focus on the gospel of Mark and one reason why he portrays Jesus in the way



that he does. Now as far as interpretation of scripture goes, I am going to take the position that, while scripture needs to be viewed in the period of history in which it was both written and seeks to portray, it is not subservient to the other traditions of the Church.

Carefully reading Mark's gospel for the first time can be a confusing experience. The controversies and apparent contradictions stand out like a sore thumb. One of the more powerful contradictions is found in Mark 2:6-10 and ch.10:17-18. In the first set of verses Jesus is found forgiving a man for his sins, therefore subtly claiming divinity because: "Only God can forgive sins." However in the second set of verses Jesus seems to be denying any claim of divinity by saying, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Now to a fundamentalist Christian these verses may present a bit of a problem. But if one takes into consideration that for a Jew in Jesus' day to claim to be God or God's Son was total blasphemy, they just weren't ready for a proclamation like that. They had a hard enough time just trying to see him as Messiah. So the Jesus of Mark is not seen claiming to be divine but is seen doing acts of divinity.

Another problem in Mark is that, while spending a considerable amount of time describing the actions of Jesus, he spends very little time explaining why he did this or that. There are a lot of verses that fit funny in the narratives. In Mark 6:45-56 Jesus is found walking to the disciples on the water. The problem is found right in the middle of the narrative. "He meant to pass them by." Now why would Jesus want to walk past the boat if he had intended to walk to it. Well, the question can be answered by saying that

Mark was using an Old Testament image. He was again trying to hint at the divinity of Jesus. In Job 9:8,11 God "treads upon the crests of the sea... Should he come near to me, I see him not, should he pass by, I am not aware of him." And just so, the disciples mistake Jesus for a ghost.

The question remains, why did Mark leave so many loose ends, so many unexplained verses. At least in the gospel of John every little action or tradition was explained; but not so with Mark. An explanation can be found, however, if one looks at the period in which the gospel of Mark was compiled. At the time when the gospel of Mark was put together the christian community may have been interested in no more than retaining a glimpse of what Jesus was like. Later on, possibly when the other gospels were being put together, the christian community was in a sense asking: "Well, now that I'm a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, how should I act?" The result of these questions being seen in the Matthean discourse on Conduct (i.e., the Sermon on the Mount) and the Lukan discourses on Civil Justice (i.e., the stories of the Good Samaritan and of the Prodigal Son). In so far as being no more than a synopsis of the good news of Jesus, Mark's gospel fill its need.

One final point that deals with twentieth century man and the gospels: it really bugs me when someone picks up the Bible and treats it like a philosophical treatise on "the Possibility of Life After Death." They totally overlook the apex of the entire work:

At the appointed time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for us godless men. It is rare that anyone should lay down his life for a just man, though it is barely possible that for a good man someone may have the courage to die. It is precisely in this way that God proves his love

for us: that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:6-8

The gospels of Matthew and Luke are most apt to lend themselves to this kind of treatment. Someone will approach the gospels of Matthew or Luke and come upon the Sermon on the Mount or maybe the Golden Rule and say, "Well, I've certainly been good enough --- God isn't going to send me to hell --- I'm no worse than the next guy." The gospel of Mark, however, being totally void of many of these discourses, is less apt to let its reader go away thinking that he can make it on his own. The gospel almost says: "Hey, even the apostles, who spent about three years with Jesus, didn't understand or make it on their own. It wasn't until their experience with the Holy Spirit during Pentecost that things began to make sense to them. It wasn't until then that they began to live the true life." When one realizes that the gospel does not ask us to apply a religious principle to our lives, but asks us to accept the salvation of the religious principal (cf. Jn. 3:3; 14:6) then these other problems and demands begin to fall into perspective.

Now what I've written so far may not shed any new light on the textual questions in Mark's gospel, but in re-reading the questions that have been posed we may stand in judgement for reading too much into Mark's gospel in the first place. The fact of the matter is that around 30 AD a carpenter from Nazareth appeared on the shores of the Jordan and soon after began spreading the news that God was going to again intervene in history in a special way that he called the "reign of God." Well, three years later he was murdered, but his followers claim that he was risen from the dead. Now if the claims of his disciples are true, that he is still alive, then twentieth century man,

who seemed so detached from the original events that took place in Palestine, is responsible for a decision as to whether Jesus is a Madman or a Savior and the implications of such a decision. And once this problem, the most important controversy that the evangelist presents to the modern scripture scholar, is solved than all these other questions will seem so secondary --- maybe then we'll even start smiling again.

"You can go to your college,  
you can go to your school,  
But if you ain't got Jesus  
you's an educated fool."

- Washington Phillips  
Denomination Blues

*Very ~~from~~ interesting  
essay, Joe*